42. Ordination:

"Charge to a Church" and "You Are Called to Tell the Story"

(1976, 1991)

Robert Y. Johnson, Ruth Duck

Ordination in the United Church of Christ is a three-way or four-way covenant between an individual who has been called and approved for authorized ministry, a local congregation, and an association (or conference acting as an association). If the ordination involves authorization for some specialized ministry or chaplaincy, ordination may become a four-way covenant.

In most ordination services, the ordinand is charged to accept the responsibilities of her or his ministry. In a similar fashion, the congregation, or special calling body, is also charged to take its obligation seriously. "Charge to a Church," written by Robert Y. Johnson, a retired pastor who served churches in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and Wisconsin, appeared in the "Platform" column of A.D. Magazine *in the mid-1970s.* A.D. Magazine *was a 1972 merger of the* United Church Herald *and* Presbyterian Life.

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Sources: Robert Y. Johnson, "Charge to a Church," *A.D. Magazine* (May 1976): 24. Ruth C. Duck, "You Are Called to Tell the Story." Words Copyright © 1991 by GIA Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

for Worship *(1981), and* Flames of the Spirit *(1985). Twelve of her hymns are in* The New Century Hymnal *(1995). Duck wrote the text for "You Are Called to Tell the Story" in 1991 for the ordination of a longtime Presbyterian friend, Elizabeth Caldwell. It seeks to "set ordained ministry in the larger context of the ministry of the whole people of God."*

Charge to a Church

You do not "have" a minister, nor does a minister "have" a church. Rather, together you have a mission. A church devoted to itself alone is like a snake that tries to swallow its own tail — it consumes instead of multiplies itself.

You call yourselves lay people, but you are also ministers. Your minister, though ordained, is also a layperson. As fingers and thumb coordinate for a firm grasp of their object, so must you and your minister function severally and together as one of God's hands stretched forth to serve.

Inside your church speak your own truth with care and encourage others to do the same. Though your truth must ever fall short of the whole truth, your witness to it will enable others to know you better. Silence may be misinterpreted as indifference, which is more damaging than hostility.

Also bear your witness outside the church in words and deeds; our fellowship must not be an army that flees from a victory we've already won. An obedient servant leaves outcomes in wiser hands.

When you remember each other in your prayers you make straight a highway for the coming of the Lord into your midst. Dissension frustrates the gospel and the most dedicated ministers as well. More important than a new organ, a new building, or anything else that money can buy is the warmth of your mutual love. If you must choose between a warm stable and a cold cathedral, let there be no doubt in your minds as to where the Christ is more likely to be born.

If you pray also for your ministers behind their backs, you will be less likely to speak harshly of them from the same location.

Temper your pastoral expectations with common sense. It is possible, but improbable, that your chosen leader will be equally adept as pulpiteer and organizer, private counselor and public prophet, fund-raiser and priest, administrator and model for the young. One fire cannot heat all irons; many buds must be pruned if the few best are to flower.

A minister with an itch for visibility may be evading the more demanding disciplines of study, prayer, and outreach, of sitting up all night with

a drug addict or a man whose wife has died. Satan runs to and fro across the land; his popularity takes a high polish.

Demand from your ministers their best and spare them not, but set them free to define the shape and style of their ministry, for what you expect of them and what God expects are not necessarily the same. Tell them what you desire of them, then see that the means are available whereby they can fulfill your desires, for responsibility without power breeds resentment. Their best friends are honest critics, not flatterers, though a pat on the back in season cheers them on.

Call them when you need them, but don't ask them to treat your pet peeve as though it were a mature Christian conviction. A pastor's life is often a series of interruptions, and its most precious possession is time.

Minister to your pastor by sharing your miseries and failures no less than your joys. Let your pastor prove to be worthy of your confidence. A pastor is shock-proof; he or she can help you or refer you to another who may.

Know that the ones you have called to serve you are burdened with a guilt peculiar to the calling, for they dare to stand for more than they are. They are constrained week after week to live with visions and mysteries our poor clay can neither embody nor communicate. Torn between that which is desirable and that which is possible, when the best is done, they can but sigh, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner."

Bear with patience the ecstasy of ministry, which sometimes feels like a woman in travail, probing the frontiers of new births of the spirit. The secret treasure in this very earthen vessel is the assurance that if God can use a body like me, he can use anybody. Be kinder to your servant than the servant is to self.

Accept with grace the occasional empty cup of sacrifice, for mountain tops do not exist apart from dark valleys.

Grant your leader seasons of refreshment and times for further education, travel, and recreation; a string stretched too taut yields poor music. Since we must be persons before we can be parsons, see that there is leisure and privacy for the enjoyment of family and for doing nothing.

As for sermons, remember that the Word truly preached is from the Spirit to minister and congregation alike and that our best judgments are in this life ambiguous. Try to glimpse beyond what is said to the spirit of what is meant, for the hearing of the Word requires no less effort than the speaking.